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Agency, intersubjectivity and drama education: The power to be and do more

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Theories of agency have long been implicit in drama education and applied theatre where the focus is on the performative, action, and engagement. What the notion of agency foregrounds is the individual, choice, freedom, and intentionality; it speaks to being purposeful and having and taking control in one's life. However, agency can also be situated within the realm of self-interest where difference is individually measured and achieved; this being seen as some worse forms of new individualism defining living in the 21st Century (Elliott & du Gay, 2009). What is not as well understood is that agency also exits in relation to others with social bonds being a powerful way of knowing ourselves and attributing meaning. Intersubjectivity is a related concept that helps reveal how this process works, and the power that drama has in contributing to young people's meaning making and the way they construct learning identities. Consequently, this entry will describe notions of agency and intersubjectivity within drama and applied theatre as particular forms of personal, social and collective action where the social and personal are inextricably linked.

In addition, I describe how dramatic processes, forms and content link and develop meaning and identity, and where representations link events through symbolic means—drama being the dance between them. It is also important to understand that while drama education is traditionally thought of as occurring in schools, drama education and the cognate field of applied theatre also occurs in the 'third learning space' beyond school and family (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005). This entry then uses the understanding gained from each of these 'spaces' to help better understand drama practices across each.

One long-standing principle of drama has been the notion of active participation, or learning by doing. Many long-standing traditions of theory and practice have elaborated drama games and exercises, skill development, and forms to enact, hold and present these as active and participatory. In addition, the theories that have evolved from this praxis consequently have foregrounded notions of embodiment (Bresler, 2004), process (O'Toole, 1992), an increasing range of application (Prentki & Preston, 2008), and critical questions that unfold from this nexus (Nicholson, 2005). What the notion of agency foregrounds is the implied benefits that flow from this active participation and the "sensuous acts of meaning making" (Willis & Trondman, 2000 p. 9) that drama enables.

Agency can be understood to be an attribute of all living things and involves the capacity to effect change. What this might mean in terms of drama and young people is that drama practices, forms and structures enables individuals to become creative and active constructors of knowledge and so cultural producers rather than cultural consumers. This means that young people can be seen to be intentional and active in creating their identities rather than having things done to them as 'objects', or being passive receptors of external action. For example, certain groups of young people are often demonised and thought to be 'at risk' (Case, 2006). Implicit within this construction is an adult presumption or prescription of risk in an increasingly risk-averse world. Indeed, all young people can be thought of to be 'at-risk' as a consequence of their relative level of powerlessness within contemporary society. However, what this construction also fails to reveal is that young people are active with or without the intervention and observation of adults, and not always in ways that are deemed 'acceptable'. This is a disregard of young people's inherent desire to be engaged with their communities, as actors, change agents and knowers, as bearers of rights, and as citizens. One consequence of this form of labelling is punitive, restrictive and increasingly controlling societal responses. This response suggests convergent as opposed to divergent thinking where options are narrowed, confined and closed, rather than open and creative. It is the antithesis to the role that drama and creativity can play in education wherever that may occur.

Conversely, drama and notions of agency enables us to think of young people as being 'at promise' rather than 'at risk'. It is through drama, for example, that risk can be thought of as engaging and providing opportunities for growth and development—the 'hard fun' often associated with the arts (Borden, 2006). Drama develops participant's awareness and the capability of being social actors or agents in their own lives; importantly this implies both

understanding one's own world representations, the way these are socially constructed, and the feelings that define one's own unique individuality.

Agency, however, is not completely individual, can be constrained in a variety of ways (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004), nor always a good thing in and of itself. Unfettered agency, for example, can be construed as unencumbered selfishness or greed, this coming at the expense of others. Structures or systems can constrain these forms of rampant individualism and drama education is a powerful model of this notion in application. What is important about this contribution is that just as the forms that are created in drama and applied theatre are a consequence of the actions of those within it, participant's actions are shaped by the forms that are created. This means that awareness of self and others is developed conjointly and strengthened by the compelling aesthetic frame that drama provides.

Intersubjectivity, which arises out of interaction, is a notion that helps us better understand the impossibility of isolated individuality through foregrounding the social elaboration of subjectivity—in other words, agency at work. This can be understood as part of the ecology of drama education and applied theatre where social processes provide the checks and balances between being for self, and being for others. What intersubjectivity also reveals is the importance of relationships to the quality of the learning experience. Furthermore, intersubjectivity highlights the way that young people do not exist in isolation but are in interrelationship with, and embedded in, their communities.

While the conceptual terrain of intersubjectivity itself is contested (Crossley, 1996), what it does do is reveal how meanings and relationships are conjointly developed and how these are used to better understand social and cultural life; in this way being educational. For example, the development of empathy—or in drama terms 'stepping into another's shoes'—allows us to infer and experience the lives of others. In the same way, performing our own subjectivity presents it as being corrigible and enables us to have distance on it. This ability grows out of our own self-awareness as a reference point, that is, our own bodily presence and it is this self-awareness that allows us to infer the mental states of others. In other words, rationality is grounded in bodily experience and the embodied mind is intersubjectively constituted at its most fundamental levels. Consequently, our sense of self is inseparable from our recognition of others (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

Donaldson (Hughes, Grieve, & Grieve, 1991) argues for a developmental 'map' of the human mind with four main modes—perception, action, thought and emotion. What

intersubjectivity does is to highlight how we first 'see' a situation through the feeling of bodily affect before we are deliberately rational about it, and emotions mark significance, what we care about; all in relation to others. Hence, we act towards others out of feelings first, principles come second. Thich Naht Hanh (1993) helpfully refers to this as 'inter-being', a process inherent in drama education. Drama practices, for example, enable us to experience and express emotion, and this ability enables us to see and understand it in others. What this means is that the actions, emotions and sensations experienced by the other become meaningful to us because we can share them. To put it differently, the *thinking* body intersubjectively comes from an awareness of the *acting* body; it is neural, somatic, and situated. Consequently agency and intersubjectivity are linked where drama practices provide the means and methods for these to be developed both brain and body alike.

Agency and intersubjectivity are threads running through drama pedagogy, each iteratively developing the other with benefits for participants. For example, in drama what begins as helplessness can become agency—where agency is understood to be both a state and a process. In addition, the social action that is a consequence combines both action and significance that enhances the life world and is often present in those who seek emancipatory change. Agency, consequently, as developed through drama can be thought of in activist terms. Drama education develops young people's capacities to investigate, evaluate, and ultimately act on issues they think are important; art has always served these purposes.

This capacity, intersubjectively constituted, is important because if young people are to actively participate in the future, they need to understand how the past shapes the present, and how an awareness of the present enables us to see possibilities for the future. This is a process that drama educators know well; for example, identification, action planning, collective action are critical to how community grapples with serious issues, and human experience—as developed through drama—is the site where this is felt and understood.

Agency and intersubjectivity, then, can be seen as core in understanding and responding to human experience. And human experience, as both the subject and object of drama, can be seen as accomplished through mutually constructing actions, interactions, and meanings as they emerge and are shared through action and symbol systems including language, sound, and movement. The capacity for understanding others then can be seen to be deeply rooted in the relational nature of action. For example, our social lives are largely determined by the way that we attribute agency to others through their actions, and recognise, understand, and respond appropriately to them. What drama foregrounds, and these two concepts reveal, is

that the process is as important as the product and that art which inquires, provokes and expresses is possible from the collaboration of multiple positions.

Agency, in short can be thought of as *knowledge building* through drama and applied theatre employing both making and looking that is student-centred, -led, and -driven. Importantly these pedagogic processes are intersubjectively contextualised through the social and aesthetic so that individual perspectives are interwoven into shared understanding. What this foregrounds is that human agency is embedded and iteratively engaged in cultural understanding, change and diversity, and the practices of drama education as a social art purposefully develops each. Agency and intersubjectivity as strengthened through drama in this way then can become an antidote to despair and hopelessness many young people feel when faced with manifestations of globalisation, instability and change. For many people this can mean hope, understanding, social transformation, and an enriched way of seeing the world (P. R Wright, 2009; P.R Wright & Palmer, 2009).

Finally, a better understanding of agency and intersubjectivity enable us to see their power when thinking about a curriculum for the future. And a curriculum for the future is one based on the power of relationship, agency and intersubjectivity—in short a curriculum of communication (Kress, 2000). This curriculum of communication is one where culture is not merely reproduced, but actively made by those who imagine and create it. This means that young people can effectively participate in the world, have their thoughts and perceptions valued, actions count, and voices heard. In this sense, both community and personal control are developed through social participation that is drama's raison d'être, and where aesthetic understanding and experience inform new possibilities of thought and action—a search for something better.

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